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Poetry Book Review: The Homeplace

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THE HOMEPLACE

Poems by Marilyn Nelson Waniek

The Homeplace, we all have one. That wonderful family home where past, present and future meet on warm summer days accompanied by good food, good conversation, and laughter! This slim volume is filled with wonderful word pictures, set in free and metered rhythms, of an African-American homeplace in the Jackson Purchase town of Hickman, Kentucky.

Each section begins with an ancestral picture and short genealogical reference point which brings one down through the years from the 1845 birth of the poetess' great-great-grandmother, in slavery, to the 1916 birth of the poetess's mother. Diverne was the Hickman slave who bore the bi-racial children destined to become important citizens in Hickman, the state of Kentucky and the world: Pomp Atwood, businessman and partner in Hickman Joint Stock Company; Rufus Atwood, President of Kentucky State University for 38 years; Melvin M. Nelson, Captain, USAF (Ret.), a Tuskegee Airman.

Entwined with the family stories is the story of the African-American struggle before, during, and after the Civil War, the failures they experienced and the successes they achieved in Hickman and beyond to the places to which they migrated: businesses, schools, the ability to go to college, the ability to earn a living! From the poem, *Intermezzo*, page 15:

But Pomp
was learning to read
from the Cowgill boys,
and Hickman had a school
for colored children
in the basement
of the C.M.E. church.
Diverne hired a wagon,
packed her 32 years
in a burlap bag,
straightened her shawl,
and lifted her children up.

That C.M.E. church is still standing and is now
the Warren Thomas Museum on Moscow Street.

The compelling theme though is of truth,
unvarnished and without excuses. From the poem,
The Ballad of Aunt Geneva, page 27:

Geneva was the wild one.
Geneva was a tart
Geneva met a blue-eyed boy
And gave away her heart.

And therein lays the power of this poetry.
Family life episodes of slavery, marriage, segregation,
war and peace are truthfully recounted in rhythms
clothed with humor and dignity. It tells the true tale
of family history: that we may all be different, but
we are all related by common bonds of human
needs and desires.

Note: This book won the 1992 Anisfield-Wolf Award from the Cleveland Foundation. At the time of this publication, 1990, Marilyn Nelson Waniek was a professor of English at the University of Connecticut Storrs. From 1978 until 1994 she wrote under the Waniek name but afterwards as Marilyn Nelson. She was poet laureate of the State of Connecticut from 2001-2006. In 2012, the Poetry Society of America awarded her the Frost Medal for "distinguished lifetime achievement in poetry" and in 2013, she was elected a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets. Her honors include a Fulbright Teaching Fellowship and a 2001 Guggenheim Fellowship. Other of her works include *For the Body*, *Mama's Promises*, and *Carver: A Life in Poems*.

Reviewed by Sarah Brady Strange